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ENGL 2112 – ENGL 4810

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22 July 2016

Psychological Effects of War in *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Erich Maria Remarque wrote *All Quiet on the Western Front* with one simple goal in mind – "to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war." The brutal trench and chemical warfare of World War I was enough to kill millions of men. However, millions more were destroyed by the psychological ramifications of fighting such a war. Through Paul Bäumer's narrative, the reader gains a greater understanding of how the war destroyed the men's youth, ruined their memories of home, and forever altered their relationships with their families. The reader is also able to glean the one saving grace – the comradeship that allows the men to cling to sanity in the hopes of making it home in one piece. The brotherhood that the soldiers at the front find with each other is the only factor capable of mitigating any of the loss they suffer.

At the promising age of eighteen, Paul Bäumer and his classmates enlist in the Army because of the forceful persuasion of their schoolmaster, Kantorek. These boys implicitly trusted their adult mentors, but "…the first death [they] saw shattered [their] belief" (Remarque 12); in that moment Paul also loses his youthful innocence. "There are seven stages of life, and… the transition from adolescent to adulthood is critical… this stage transition was shattered, and that… will have profound effects on the abilities of the soldiers to adapt to post-war life" (Hunt 491). Rather than building a life for himself, Paul is literally thrust onto a battlefield with no established life to return to should he survive. This sad fact is something that he is all too aware

of – "We had as yet taken no root. The war swept us away. For the others, the older men, it is but an interruption. They are able to think beyond it. We, however, have been gripped by it and do not know what the end may be. We know only that in some strange and melancholy way we have become a waste land" (Remarque 20). Paul and his classmates have nothing tethering them to their past, so they are swept up by the war and lost to it.

Perhaps memories of home would be of some comfort to the men. But, their memories are of their childhood and its accompanying innocence, which contrasts starkly with the reality of the front lines. These memories are exquisitely painful, rather than comforting, because "they are unattainable, and [the men] know it" (Remarque 121). Allowing these memories in makes it impossible for the men to do their jobs, and anything can be a reminder. Paul's friend Detering is court martialed after picking a cherry blossom and being unable to resist the urge to return home. His memories uncontrollably overwhelm him, and he pays dearly for it. Their recent memories are also avoided at all costs. When the men are behind the front lines, they quickly forget about their experiences at the front. As Paul explains, "…the front-line days, when they are past, sink down in us like a stone; they are too grievous for us to be able to reflect on them at once. If we did that, we should have been destroyed long ago" (Remarque 138). To avoid being destroyed by their memories, the men must avoid them.

When the men return home on leave, they find that their memories cannot be recreated or relived because home does not feel the same. Civilian life feels distant and unfamiliar. Paul is simultaneously attracted to the simplicity and safety of civilian life and repelled by its narrow scope. He asks himself, "…how can that fill a man's life, he ought to smash it to bits; how can they do it, while out at the front the splinters are whining over the shell-holes and shell-stars go up, the wounded are carried back on waterproof sheets and comrades crouch in the trenches. –

They are different men here, men I cannot properly understand, whom I envy and despise" (Remarque 169). Remarque writes the scenes of Paul at home with his family "to illustrate how the war had destroyed the ties, psychological, moral, and real, between the front generation and society at home" (Eksteins 351). Because those ties have been destroyed, all Paul wants is to return to the front, to be with his friends despite the death and destruction. His home has been frozen in time with his past, but he has changed into a completely different man, and he no longer belongs outside of his new world.

In this new world, the lines between friends and enemies shift. "Alienation from the world beyond the battlefield often left men feeling more benevolence for the 'enemy' than others – again, this might include officers, civilians, women – on their own side" (Moseley 5). Paul experiences this empathy for the enemy when he is stuck in No Man's Land in a shell hole. An enemy soldier ends up in the hole with him, and Paul stabs the other man. As his adrenaline wears off and the 'enemy' is dying, Paul has an epiphany about the war – "…you were only an idea to me before, an abstraction that lived in my mind and called forth its appropriate response. It was that abstraction I stabbed. But now, for the first time, I see you are man like me…" (Remarque 223). Paul has more in common with the enemy than he does with his home and his family. The soldiers, regardless of national affiliation, are the ones suffering. His realization of the universality of the wartime experience occurs when he is in the hospital. It dawns on him that "…this is only one hospital, one single station; there are hundreds of thousands in Germany, hundreds of thousands in France, hundreds of thousands in Russia" (Remarque 263). If there is any good to be gained from the war, it is the realization that the men on the other side are the same.

This new understanding reflects just a portion of the importance of comradeship within the soldiers on one side. Paul and his friends have formed an unbreakable bond that makes the unbearable bearable. Using an apt metaphor, Paul describes their existence:

> "We are little flames poorly sheltered by frail walls against the storm of dissolution and madness, in which we flicker and sometimes almost go out. Then the muffled roar of the battle becomes a ring that encircles us, we creep in upon ourselves, and with big eyes stare into the night. Our only comfort is the steady breathing of our comrades asleep, and thus we wait for the morning" (Remarque 275).

The simple friendships that the men form with each other allow them to keep their sanity. "The finest thing that arose out of the war" (Remarque 27), comradeship was the one factor that could mitigate the horrors of the front lines.

As Remarque developed the psychological effects of the war, he created a timeless and universal narrative. A 21st century veteran challenges others veterans "to pick up *All Quiet*, read the thing through… and find a single passage to which they cannot relate, or at least on some level conceive of" (Bernstein 200) because even though war looks very different today, the psychological effects that Remarque described have not changed much. Furthermore, when *All Quiet* was published, it was a revolutionary novel because foreign readers were able to see "that the German soldier's experience of the war had been, in its essentials, no different from that of soldiers of other nations" (Eksteins 361). What Remarque demonstrates through Paul's realization that the enemy is the really the same as himself was actively realized by his readers. The German soldier was not the enemy; everyone who fought in World War I came out of it having experienced the same war.

Although it would be simple to classify *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a war novel, at its core, it is a novel about humanity. War brings out the worst in people – but it also highlights their strengths because awful situations bring people together in a way that good times cannot. As Remarque explores the psychological effects of WWI, the reader sees how Paul and his friends were ripped away from their youth, how the men are unable to use their memories as a source of joy for fear of losing their minds, and how civilian life – how home – has lost its familiarity and comfort. These painful realities are tempered by one thing – comradeship, which ironically enough exists more with the enemy soldiers than it does the civilians at home. It becomes all too easy to understand how the War was able to destroy so many people mentally, but it also offers readers a sliver of hope in the strength of comradeship.

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